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Lewis, Jane

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Women, Welfare and the State: Some Notes on Feminist Concepts

Jane Lewis

The literature on women, welfare and the state has developed a number of concepts for the analysis of women's relationship to social policies which have also served to deepen the current debates on welfare provision. I shall address three of these – gender, the idea of dependency, and the public/private dichotomy – before taking up the question that is inevitably central to all this work: what *is* welfare for women?

Early 1970s feminist literature attacked the idea of the welfare state as much as it attacked the family as the most significant locus of women's oppression. Elizabeth Wilson (1977) contended that ›social welfare policies amount to no less than the state organisation of domestic life‹. Interestingly, this is a not dissimilar position to that adopted by many New Right theorists in the 1980s. Ferdinand Mount (1983), for example, has depicted the family as being in permanent revolt against state intervention. This portrayal of state welfare as simply oppressive is crude; as crude, indeed, as early interpretations of women's experiences historically in terms of ›social control‹ by male-dominated professions or by agents of the state, which in turn rendered women ›victims‹. Such interpretations effectively deny the possibility of female resistance or mediation, as well as missing the crucial elements of conflict within the apparatus of the state and the simple, but important, point that the interests of male actors are not all the same.

More recently, the project of feminist analysts of welfare policies has been to insert the concept of gender – the social construction of femininity and masculinity – into the debate, and this has proved a much more powerful tool of analysis. As Ann Oakley (1986), has remarked: ›to talk of welfare was and is to make assumptions about the roles of men and women, which if challenged, call into question the very notion of social welfare itself‹. The development of post war analysis of social policy was influenced strongly by Richard Titmuss's (1958) threefold categorisation of welfare into occupational, fiscal and state provision. This ignored gender in two crucial ways. First, it omitted due consideration of the informal provision of welfare by the family, and within the family by its female members (Finch and Groves 1983, Lewis and Meredith 1988). The informal sector has become increasingly central to social policy analysis in the 1980s because of both the emphasis of the New Right on rolling back the state and because demographic trends have made care for the frail elderly in western industrial nations a matter of immediate concern. Second, while Titmuss and his followers emphasised above all social class as a variable for analysing the social division of welfare, much recent historical work by feminists has stressed the importance of studying the gendered nature of class formation (especially Davidoff and Hall 1987). Indeed, our society is fundamentally gendered, for example in terms of the meaning of crucial concepts, such as citizenship, and in terms of access to wealth and of resources of all kinds, including education. Gender as a concept thus has a descriptive power and enables us to theorize about the nature of phenomena or reality. As Joan Scott (1986) has argued, it is a way of conceptualizing power: political ideologies have been constructed using gendered concepts (Okin 1980 and Pateman 1983) and inequalities persist despite constant changes in occupational structures and in the precise nature of sexual divisions at any historical moment.

The insertion of gender into the debate about welfare provision has provided one of the most effective frameworks for assessing the full meaning of the move in the 1980s in both Britain and the USA towards stressing the importance of welfare provision by the private, voluntary and informal sectors rather than the state. Such policies rest in large measure on ungendered notions of both family and work. In particular, government policy in Britain and the USA has become centred on the desire to increase independence and to reduce dependency on the state. In the view of politicians and theorists of the New Right, the culture of the welfare state has fostered a culture of dependency. In this analysis, the promotion of independence thus entails rolling back state aid. Dependency is as much a gendered concept as any other, and feminist analysis has proved an important means of elucidating both the limited nature of the definition accorded it and the underlying assumptions of the strategy accompanying it.

The concept of dependency has long been important in feminist analysis of the family, welfare and labour markets. It has been shown to underpin the emergence of the ideal of a family wage and the bourgeois family form of male breadwinner and dependent wife and children in industrial societies. While this ideal has never been achievable by a substantial minority of the population, it has (until the very recent past) arguably been a shared ideal on the part of employer and employee, and men and women for reasons that have much to do with the onerous nature of early twentieth century housework and childbearing (Lewis 1986a). Historically, women have tended to demand welfare provision on behalf of their children rather than for themselves and tensions between loyalty to family and self-fulfillment have been, and are, real. Problems in state policy have arisen when policymakers have accepted the ideal of the bourgeois family form and the family wage and have ignored the reality of their absence. Assuming women to be dependent on a male wage, policymakers have treated them as such, and thereby denied both their substantial contributions to the provision of welfare and the entitlements that were their due (Lewis 1983). In addition, women's needs have been defined in terms of what has been perceived as their primary role of wives and mothers, but according to a definition of motherhood as a social function rather than in terms of women's needs as individuals (Riley 1983).

By passing over women's contribution as both unpaid and paid providers of welfare (a large proportion of the vast increase in married women's paid employment in post-war Britain and the USA has been in the service of the welfare state), it has been possible for policy analysts to argue that women are disproportionately beneficiaries of state welfare, for example, in terms of their use of the National Health Service and the number of visits they make to general practitioners. And in both Britain and the USA enormous attention has focussed on the problem of what has been termed the ›feminisation of poverty‹ and the numbers of divorced and elderly women and unmarried mothers drawing welfare benefits. The label ›feminisation of poverty‹ is misleading in that it suggests a new phenomenon. In fact, women have always been poor. The proportion of women in receipt of state benefits in Britain in 1908 was 61 %; in 1983 it was 60 % (Lewis and Piachaud 1987). However, in the early twentieth century the main group of applicants were widows rather than divorcees or unmarried mothers, and these have always been perceived as ›deserving‹. Female poverty has attracted the recent attention of government and of policy analysts, especially in the USA, because of the growth in the number of single parent families, 90 % of whom are headed by women. In the USA, the assault on the welfare state as unaffordable has focussed, to all intents and purposes irrationally, on the smaller spending programmes – aid to families with dependent children, abortion, bussing and affirmative action – rather than on the large social security programmes for the elderly, which are

popular and have grown in terms of expenditure during the 1980s. Thatcherite restructuring of the welfare state has been less selective, but there has been a similar conflation of the moral and the social in British New Right rhetoric. To find a parallel it is probably necessary to go back to the late nineteenth century debates over the causes of poverty, which even in the case of the well-known empirical investigations by Charles Booth relentlessly confused issues of individual moral failure (such as drunkenness) with structural causes (Hennock 1976).

The particularly ferocious assault on the dependency on the state of lone parent families raises some important issues. The ›problem‹ of one parent families has been defined as one of women with children and without men, and over time perceptions as to how to deal with this group of women have undergone profound shifts. Late nineteenth century policies treated them as workers. The local poor law authorities thus usually took some of the children into the workhouse, leaving the mother to support as many as she could out of her wages (Thane 1978). Mid-twentieth century governments, working under the influence of Bowlby (1953) and having realized that out-door relief was considerably cheaper than institutional care, decided to treat lone mothers as mothers and pay them benefits, with the corollary that the state would play the part of husband and insist on sexual fidelity (Fairbairns 1979). If cohabition is discovered, it is presumed that the man is supporting the woman, which is consistent with the assumptions of the family wage model. At the present time, in the United States (and in the discussion beginning in Britain), the pendulum is swinging back towards treating single mothers as workers. ›Workfare‹ schemes in the US, by which women are obliged to seek either training or engage in paid employment (the nature of the schemes varies enormously) and put their children in daycare, have been underpinned by a rhetoric of ›formal equality‹ between the sexes (Radcliffe Richards 1980) which effectively ignores substantive inequalities caused by gendered access to jobs, wealth and income.

Implicitly, both Thatcherite and Reaganite welfare policies have declared women's dependency on men or the labour market to be acceptable, but have condemmed dependency on the state. The whole attack on the culture of the welfare state has been focussed on one type of dependency and has ignored the real system of shifting and inter-related material dependencies over the life course. (Emotional dependency, especially of men on women, has not entered the public debate.) If we accept that there are three major sources of income for women in society: men, the labour market and the state (Rainwater, Rein and Schwartz 1986), then the late twentieth century has seen a major shift towards increasing dependency on the labour market for married women and for single women without children, and towards dependency on the state, for single women with children. But because of the gendered division of paid and unpaid

work, married women tend to rely on both wages and husbands for support, and single women on both wages and the state.

In the case of the two parent family, government policy in the 1980s has had the effect of forcing the family to ›stand on its own feet‹ and of reinforcing family privacy and the boundary between public and private. The New Right sees the two parent family as the primary agent of modernisation – producing fully autonomous individuals – in a manner similar to the structural functionalist sociology of the 1950s. Considerable effort has been put into exhorting the family to look after its dependent members (David 1986). In previous bouts of panic about the family, anxiety tended to focus on the behaviour of either the husband or the wife. In early twentieth century Britain it was the working class father whom it was feared was not exerting himself sufficiently to provide for his wife and children. In the post World War II period, attention focussed firmly on ›inadequate‹ mothering in accordance with Bowlby's theories of maternal deprivation. Now blame is attached to the state which has encouraged dependency and to the professionals employed by the state (especially social workers), who are perceived to have eroded the confidence and responsibilities of parents (Lewis 1986b). Rita Kramer's (1983) case is typical of that of the New Right in the current ›battle for the family‹:

> Will society return control of children to the family . . . can we return self assurance to mothers and fathers, along with confidence in how they raise their young? Or is it too late to stop the inexorable movement led by professionals, justified by academics, funded by government, and publicized by the media that claims that society knows best and is ready to tell mothers and fathers how to do it, and even to do it for them?

Such views resonate beyond the present debate and beyond the concerns of the New Right. George Orwell in the 1930s and Christopher Lasch and Jacques Donzelot in the 1970s articulated similar concerns. None gives much space to the ›voice of the client‹, which both in the early part of this century (Thane 1984) and in the 1980s (Coffield and Sarsby 1981) has expressed a desire not so much to be left alone, but for non-stigmatising, non-intrusive help. In fact families are increasingly being left ›free‹ from intervention until ›failure‹ manifests itself – most strikingly in the form of child abuse. Then intervention may be hard and heavy.

The aim of current policies is not so dissimilar from the kind of public/private distinctions conceived of by late nineteenth century classical liberalism, whereby welfare was properly confined to the private sphere of the family, while the public sphere was ruled by market principles with no quarter allowed the weak. In this formulation, the position of women who may often be providing welfare as unpaid carers of the elderly or children and therefore be in need of support, whether in the form of financial benefits or services, becomes extremely hazardous.

The issue as to how far the private sphere should be politicized is nevertheless a matter of debate among feminist analysts as well as New Right theorists J.B. Elshtain (1981) has argued that the private must be redeemed and the public repoliticized, such that the relations within each are transformed and a moral code established for each. Elshtain believes that the preservation of the personal requires the separation of the public and the private, echoing, albeit from a very different perspective, Wilson's fear as to the ›state organization of domestic life‹. Because she sees public life as dominated by monopoly and bureaucracy, Elshtain feels that identification with the public order as currently constructed would mean the suppression of women's social worlds and female culture. But are there fundamentally different values attaching to the family and the private as opposed to the public world of work and citizenship that should not be mixed? Feminist intervention in the infertility debate and particularly on the issue of surrogacy, has been fraught with difficulty because of these issues (Lewis 1986c). On the one hand, it has been argued that market relations should not be allowed to encroach further into sexual relations and procreation and on the other, that women have the right to rent their wombs.

In the current climate, where public expenditure cuts and social policies are drawing the boundaries more firmly around the full-time labour market, excluding marginal workers, such as married women and increasing their dependency on men, Caole Pateman's (1983) analysis may be a sounder guide than that of Elshtain. She sees the conflict between freedom and equality, and women's dependency as the contradiction at the heart of liberal democracy and argues that it is necessary to abandon the assumptions and practices that result from the idea that personal lives can be separated from political life. Only then will it be possible to integrate women fully as citizens. Equal citizenship depends on the deriving of, and mobilisation for, appropriate policies that address the private as well as the public sphere.

All this begs the question of what *is* welfare for women. Within feminist discourse, there has been constant tension between those who claim equality with men, necessarily on men's terms, and those who claim women to be equal but different. In practical terms, this translates into what kind of enabling legislation is demanded for which groups of women in which sphere, the public or the private? For example, in pensions policy it is easier to ask for home responsibility credits than for the erosion of the gender inequality in paid and unpaid work that produces the pensions inequality in the first place. And, in accordance with the ›equality‹ and ›difference‹ positions, there is feminist support for both solutions. Formal equality on men's terms brings obvious hazards. Workfare schemes and 1980s divorce legislation in both Britain and the USA have employed the concept of ›equality‹ to argue for same treatment. But ›a fair field and no favour‹

effectively means that real gender inequalities are disregarded, particularly in terms of the way in which unpaid work is shared in our society. On the other hand, social policies derived from the equal but different position, such as home responsibility credits, or payments to female carers of the elderly, may be argued to reinforce female dependency on men and the unequal division of unpaid work, as much as they may sustain a female culture.

As Joan Scott (1988) has argued, the equality/difference opposition is unhelpful. An option for equality means accepting that difference is antithetical to it, an option for difference admits equality is unattainable. The choice is an impossible one. The real challenge for feminist social policy analysis thus becomes the reclaiming of the language of choice and autonomy, which means overriding the equality/difference opposition and insisting on differences as the meaning of equality. For example, the problem of lone parent families disappears if we conceptualise it as a problem of differing employment and childcare needs over the lifecourse; most one parent families have after all been two parent families. The goal has to be a redefinition of the terms of the debate and a rejection of spurious oppositions like equality versus difference and dependence versus independence.

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